

Syrian Battlefields Divide Adversaries; Lucrative Border Crossings Bring Them Together

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Brief Analysis

Despite the collapse of the [Syrian economy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/The-Future-of-Northeastern-Syria-In-Conversation-with-SDF-Commander-in-Chi\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/The-Future-of-Northeastern-Syria-In-Conversation-with-SDF-Commander-in-Chi) due to the ongoing war that has raged for years, Syria's war economy benefits those known as "war profiteers," who exploit the war, siege, and mass poverty to amass vast resources. These profiteers operate via border crossings that connect regions in conflict, which continue to play a key and unique role in whether [Syrian refugees can find safety \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/lebanese-are-tired-of-hosting-syrian-refugees\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/lebanese-are-tired-of-hosting-syrian-refugees).

But the potential profit of controlling these crossings has developed a network of interests between the warring factions. These border crossings also represent an important source of income for opposition forces, especially since foreign support has dried up. At the same time, the forces and militias loyal to the Assad regime also benefit from these crossings, which ensures their allegiance to the government.

In the face of non-stop bombardment by the Assad regime and its Russian partners, the number of Syrians fleeing the death and destruction of the latest push on Idlib are increasing. They have massed near the Turkish border in the hopes that Turkish authorities would grant them safe passage into the country, where they may find peace and security. However, these authorities have opened only one border crossing for them: a domestic border crossing within the Hbit region (Idlib), in which they can move through territory under the control of regime forces and their allies according to the current agreement between Russia and Turkey. And though the conversation on borders has shifted with Turkey's announcement that it is no longer monitoring the borders with Greece and Bulgaria, the fate of Syrians still trapped in [northwest Syria \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-fate-of-tel-rifaat-hangs-in-the-balance\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-fate-of-tel-rifaat-hangs-in-the-balance) remains grim.

Thus, Syrians currently have only two options before them, both of which are deadly: remain under bombardment in opposition-held areas or move into regime-held territory, an option which most of these Internally displaced people (IDPs) have rejected for fear of regime reprisal, either through imprisonment or torture, as this has previously been the case in other urban areas.

Meanwhile, the Syrian-Turkish border crossings remain closed to IDPs, opening only in some cases of medical emergency, for commercial purposes, or to transport goods to and from Turkey. As such, these commercial activities

have become a large source of income to the war profiteers on all sides of the conflict. For example, some Syrian relatives of the leaders of military factions active in northern Syria are allowed to import shipments of essential goods and bring them into Syria under “transit” (i.e. without paying taxes, merely paying symbolic fees). Much of the time, these goods are sent via domestic crossings from regions under the control of the opposition or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to regime-held territories. The revenue generated from the black market is the main reason behind such continuous conflicts over border crossings, especially Bab al-Salama Border Crossing in Azaz (rural Aleppo), Jarabulus Border Crossing, and Tel Abyad Border Crossing in Raqqqa.

There is also the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing controlled by the so-called Syrian Salvation Government loyal to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front, which, according to credible sources, brokers secret deals with the Syrian regime to smuggle in many essential goods, such as sugar, flour, and medicine, from Turkey. According to these same sources, the income generated by this operation at Bab Al-Hawa is equal to that earned by all the other aforementioned border crossings combined, even when considering the amount of imported goods and the ability of all the different factions—Turkish authorities, HTS, and pro-Assad militias—to secure the crossings and roads.

According to the estimates of relevant local sources and some international workers at those crossings, the crossings supervised by the Turkish state and Syrian Interim Government (SIG) earn a daily income of nearly one million Turkish lira (\$100,000). This money is deposited directly into a Turkish Ziraat Bankası bank account under the name of the SIG President, the Turkish-supported governmental alternative to Assad whose main tasks include following Turkish instructions and signing bonds and vouchers for local city councils within opposition-held territories. These are the territories that have fallen under Turkish influence following Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and **Peace Spring (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/how-will-the-sdf-react-to-turkeys-invasion>)**. The ‘President’ also disburses compensation to factions that have lately rallied under the mantle of the so-called “National Army.”

While Turkey reaps the lion’s share of the proceeds from those crossings, the SIG only takes in about five hundred thousand TL per month or 2% of the total estimated income of the crossings, in spite of the current understanding between the Turkish government and the SIG that the latter should receive 30% of the revenue. To rectify this situation, the newest iteration of SIG—led by Abdurrahman Mustafa—entered into new talks with the Turkish government about the border crossing proceeds, which resulted in a new agreement allocating 15% of the income to the SIG. However, although more than two months have passed since that new agreement, the SIG’s revenue from the border crossing reached only about 750,000 TL, which is much less than the agreed-upon 15%. A lack of access to this key cash flow has been a major hindrance to the Syrian Interim Government’s ability to effectively deal with the refugee crisis. With the situation on the ground worsening every day, the ball remains in the court of the superpowers and international community to provide aid, financial and otherwise, to over a million citizens trapped there.

It seems that the solution to the border crossing crisis and their monopolization by individuals should start with pressure on the Turkish government to truly activate the SIG’s role as an independent technocratic government. Turkey should then hand over the administration and supervision of these border crossings to its relevant ministries and local councils within Syria. Secondly, the United States should support the SIG with experts, studies, and training for its staff working at those border crossings. With focus likely to shift towards a question of how **Europe’s most recent response to Syria’s ongoing major humanitarian crisis (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-forms-of-old-hate-confronting-assads-anti-semitism-in-germany>)**, the profiteering of those on the ground should not be ignored. In the meantime, Syrians facing one of the worst humanitarian crises since the beginning of the war remain trapped, one way or another. ❖

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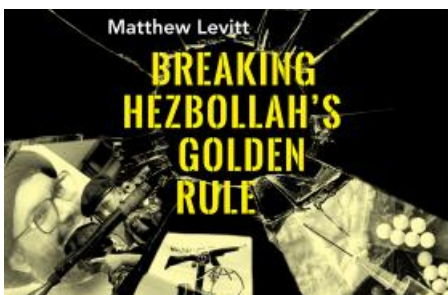
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